

## WAITING FOR RAIN

### Short Story in English – 2<sup>nd</sup> prize (2010)

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#### Synopsis

*I sit on the sidewalk and look at the houses for hours sometimes. I take out my notebook and sketch their pictures. Ma laughs at them saying, who needs to be tied down anyway? In a month or two, we'd be back on the road, and I'd be watching my mother's profile as outside houses zip past, a blur of color, the telephone lines breaking the sky into strips of blue.*

Carlie is twelve, and would like nothing more than constancy, to settle down in one place she could call home. Her mother's whims and compulsions, however, leave Carlie physically and emotionally rootless, as the two drift from one small town to the next. Carlie finds herself quietly but increasingly resentful of their nomadic life, and her blind adulation for her mother begins to splinter. *Waiting for Rain* is about a mother and daughter, and the tensions that arise between a beautiful woman in perpetual adolescence and a young girl just blossoming into the wisdom of adulthood.

## Waiting for Rain

I think my life has, from the very beginning, been a mistake. My mother's mistake. She had me very young, barely after she was old enough to be using deodorants. I was conceived, so Ma says, in her nanny's tiny bedroom who was then out buying dried fish at the corner store. My mother's parents were arguing upstairs, over how disgracefully their daughter had been behaving since turning fourteen. Lolo said he was petrified that Ma would turn out to be one genuine slut like Lola. I think Ma came the exact moment Lola slapped Lolo resoundingly across the face.

The doctors had to cut Ma up to get me out. She shows me the scars sometimes. As a little girl I used to ask her to, fascinated by the markings just below her belly button, a brown lighter than the rest of her. These days she shows them to me as a reminder of what she had to go through to bring me out into the world.

The name on my birth certificate is Carlissa de Vera Santiago. Santiago, which is Ma's maiden name because my father sort of forgot to show up when it was time to sign the papers. My father sort of forgot to show up ever again, but no one really misses him that much anyway. And my first name's *Carlissa* – a misspelled *Clarissa* because Ma's really bad at writing.

I'm 12 years old. I don't have my period yet but Ma tells me it's like Christmas – it's nothing really worth waiting up for. I could be a late bloomer, she says, which is supposed to be great, because that means I get to be a kid longer than most. But I think my Ma's just really scared that the moment I start growing breasts, I'd turn out to be a genuine slut like her and her Ma.

She never did get along much with her parents. She never did get along much with anyone, except maybe me. *Carlie*, she'd go. *Carlie. Come give your Ma a hug will you?* I think I've already begun to outgrow that, but I know better than to argue when she's in such a mood. I'd be sitting there beside her, listening to her tell me about how she wishes people would just leave her alone. Whenever she gets this way, I know enough to pack up my things that night and wait for the signal that we'd be taking the next bus out of town.

Packing isn't much of a problem. I got my few clothes which could fit in a suitcase so long as I roll them up into little balls. The other suitcase I fill up with a pair of shoes and comic books and notebooks and pictures, and packing this is a bit harder. Because here I see, piece by piece, souvenirs of the place we were leaving behind. Here were the sneakers a nice neighbor gave me, after seeing that my old pair was turning my toenails black. The stash of horror *komiks*, won from a boy in a higher grade, who bet he could spin a top better than I. My notebooks, their margins I've illuminated with dirty drawings of naked men and women. A small wooden paperweight: the carved figure of the Virgin Mother, one my Ma bought as a joke. And underneath my school stuff, a small, secret plastic bag where a pack of pink, scented sanitary napkins waited for the magic moment to be opened.

Ever since I was very little, my Ma couldn't stay longer than a full year anywhere. She particularly despised my grandparents' house so we were constantly on the move. Tarlac, Laoag, Batangas, back to Manila, then southward down to Iloilo. I forget the other places but now we're staying in Daet, in a barrio called Sta. Ana.

Rent is cheap, Ma says, in the provinces. She makes a living teaching piano, the only thing she can do well besides seducing men. I go to a public school whenever I

can, but mostly I like wandering around town looking at people's houses. Mansions, with their tall fences and shiny cars, dogs tethered at the gates. Tiny shacks, their windows sagging with scraggly plants, the tires on their roof keeping their rafters from blowing off.

I sit on the sidewalk and look at them for hours sometimes. I take out my notebook and sketch their pictures. Ma laughs at them saying, who needs to be tied down anyway? In a month or two, we'd be back on the road, and I'd be watching my mother's profile as outside houses zip past, a blur of color, the telephone lines breaking the sky into strips of blue.

It's been this way all my life. We travel by bus, by train, by boat, my mother tucking my hand into hers, talking about a clean slate, a fresh start, while outside the window the sky burns bright and untarnished.

It is five in the afternoon. I am running down a dirt road, my sandals kicking up clumps of dust, as if in competition with the coughed-up exhaust from passing tricycles. My schoolbag, navy-blue, a cousin's hand-me-down, slams against my side. *Whack!* Like my seatmate the other day, his bottom slapped soundly for peering up the teacher's skirt. *Whack! Whack!*

I make a sharp turn. A narrow pathway hurries my feet towards a small house that shrinks back into a grove of mango trees. Its walls, painted dirty white, are narrow and fold unto themselves so that the house looks as if it were holding its breath, in hopeful anticipation.

I go through the back door, the screen hitting the wooden frame with a bang. Ma? I say. I forget I am not allowed to raise my voice when a pupil is in the house. There's a stutter of piano keys, like an arthritic patient stumbling through his requiem.

Luis! So I did make it in time. I clatter from the kitchen and into the gloom of the living room. Out of breath, eyes adjusting to the dimness, I am barely able to suppress the gladness ballooning in my chest. Sitting hunched at the piano, painfully struggling through some stupid elementary piece, is the boy. Luis, with his unruly mound of hair, his scowl a permanent fixture on his face. Ma sits on a separate chair, one she's dragged from the kitchen table. Her hand, tapping a pencil against the side of the piano, ticks like a manual metronome. She glances at me, holding up a hand for my silence, and I slip into the shadows, into the dusty warmth of the sofa, to listen to him.

I have harbored affections before, for students of my Ma. Often I'd be at the end of merciless teasing about them. *Car-lie, Car-lie*, she'd chant, *sitting by the pi-a-no... sigh, she sighs, she loves him so-OH!*

When I was nine I fell in love with a fifteen-year-old local boy. He would play a Beethoven minuet over and over, fingers never faltering. I'm not allowed near the students while Ma's teaching them, so I'd often watch in secret, behind a half-closed door, scurrying off when I heard the bench scrape on the floor. Ma would laugh at me. That kid doesn't know how to play! He can't read the notes; he just memorizes the numbering and pretends to pass it off as playing! She'd say this, her fingers leaping over the keys, a jaunty little tune on the piano. Besides, she says with a wink, he's in love with *me*.

This infuriated me to no end. He left his books at the house one time, and, smuggling them to the bathroom, to the one place I knew I'd be alone, I painstakingly proceeded to erase the numbers penciled over the notes. When he came back for his next lesson, I listened from behind the door, hearing his fingers stumble from one wrong key to the next. I squeezed my eyes shut, and prayed to the Virgin Mother to let his

fingers see, let his fingers see. They remained blind, though, and the Virgin Mother smiled blandly at me, eyes unblinking.

Fingers, Ma says, have eyes. You don't really tell them where to go — they just know, if you trust them enough. While hers go dancing on the piano, and over the contours of men's bodies, mine travel across paper, tracing curves, marking paths, mapping out houses and houses, and the faces of people.

Later that night, as we sink into bed, Ma and I, she takes my hand and slips it under her shirt. You feel that, she whispers. There's the familiar soft swell of her belly, the ridges of her scars. There's no hurry, she says. Sex never was worth the pain.

When she sleeps she snores, and over the symphony she makes, the sound of thunder on a restless sky.

In Daet, intense heat comes before a violent shower. Staring into the distance, Luis and I, him with his hand shading his eyes, me spitting splinters of melon seeds from between my teeth. The road shimmies from where we stand.

Do you see them coming? I say. He shakes his head. Not within sight, but we could hear the band advancing. The boom and rattle of the drums, the wail of the brass. Luis drops on the ground and with a stick starts tracing random lines on the dirt.

I think my dad's in love with your mom, he says.

I don't reply. I split another seed in my mouth and spit out the skin.

Well, he says, squinting briefly at me. I just thought you should know.

It's the band at last; it announces itself physically, first as a rumble I feel at the base of my feet, then with a flash that pierces the eye as the sun catches at the edge of a cymbal. We watch them make their way down the road, these men sweltering in their

stiff white uniforms, hats scaling the sky, the whole group of them marching in a loose box formation. Crawling right behind them, with a low, grumbling noise is a hearse, its black shell baking in the dusty heat. Behind the car, mourners sweat in their Sunday clothes, some swooning from grief or the heat.

Here they come! I holler, pointing. We watch the funeral march in silence, while the music rudely upsets the still, hot air.

Ma and I arrived in Sta. Ana on a day similar to this. We got off the bus and stood with our luggage along the roadside as a funeral passed by. That time it was Luis' mother.

If I lost my Ma – I say aloud as the thought occurs to me – can I stay with you?

Luis, with that scowl, picks up a small piece of rock and feels its weight on his hand. No, he says, before he lets go of it.

We watch it rise to the sky, arcing across the bright white before descending, a comet falling. When it hits the roof of the hearse, we are already racing away, laughing and screeching, faces in the wind, feet lightly touching ground, and had we spread our arms at the last moment, we would have taken to the air ourselves.

When will it come? Ma stands by the screen door, looking outside.

I look up from my drawings, charcoal filling the white page with night. Who are you waiting for?

She looks at me, and even in the dim light I can tell that she's wearing her lips in scarlet again. What? Without the piano, her hands roam, in the air, on her hair, over the skirt of her dress. She is a beautiful woman, my Ma.

I am drawing her face. My pencil traces the strong line of her chin. In a sketch that is shaded with grays, her lipstick is a solid black. Where do we get our money, Ma?

She turns around so that now she stands with her back to the screen, facing me. She wills her hands to be still; her arms cross over her breasts. I teach piano, Carlie.

Outside, a moth flutters to be let in. I have to keep brushing my drawing free of *gamu-gamo*. They endlessly fall from the fluorescent light overhead that my Ma's face fills up with insects.

Ma, you have only Luis and that fat lady who plays in Church.

The pencil, now imitating the soft flower pattern of her blouse. I wish I had watercolor paint. I'd fill in the flowers with a delicate periwinkle color, and then I'd slide a yellow sheen over Ma's cheek—an artificial glow from an artificial light.

Look around you, Carlie. It isn't much and this isn't even our house. That piano's out of tune but we're lucky to have one this time. What makes you think we had any money?

It's just that... Luis' father is rich, but he's not good-looking or anything. And all those men before, I was just wondering if they gave you money or...

A slam on the table. The bottle of fish sauce at the center of the table jerks nervously, threatening to tip and spill over.

Don't speak to me again until you've apologized. These words, a stranger's words, their tone completely alien to me. The woman who is my mother is always laughing, teasing; it is she who constantly apologizes, *Carlie Carlie, don't be mad but we have to go, tomorrow, I have the bus tickets; I'm sorry, love, but let's not spend Christmas there, you know how dull Lolo's place is; come, Carlie, I know it's hard, it's the middle of the school year but...*

But this woman, standing across the table from me, is not laughing, is not teasing—this woman who is my mother.

I knew it was coming; I've imagined the scene too many times, collected the information from Ma. Crouched on the toilet, holding my cramping tummy, I've locked myself in the bathroom, three hours now, waiting for it to come. Ma is exasperated. She keeps slamming her fist at the door. *Carlie! Out!*

In the hot, narrow room, with the broken tiles and the faucet that won't work, I am sitting at the toilet, burning matches to fight the urine smell staining the air.

*Jesusmaryosep, you're not in labor, you know! It's just your fucking period!*

The landlady, a widowed woman of sixty who occupies the bedroom next to ours, calms my mother in soothing tones. This is her special day, she says.

I wait for it to come, patiently, faithfully, reveling in the pain on my stomach, all the way round to the small of my back, my panties around my ankles. With shaking hands I make a delicate tear on pink plastic wrapping, catching the whiff of perfume. Sanitary napkins. A woman's scent.

When it finally comes, I emerge from the bathroom, to my mother's curses. I am immune to her words. I look at her as an equal now—in my own way, I have given birth. I feel it between my legs; on my belly, an itch. I will slip Ma's hand over my stomach and say, *can you feel it?* The imaginary scars, battle scars that I know will eventually bloom.

I rubbed the blood on my face, Ma says. Your Lola told me to. So I won't grow zits. She starts laughing. I had them anyway. Over rice and *dinuguan*-- pork soaked in

pig's blood— my Ma's idea of a clever joke, she's laughing and laughing, at the story, at the food, the landlady, smiling at me in a way that I wanted them both to be drowned out by thunder, or dissolved by the lightning that crackles in the still, dry air.

You'll shoot up now, tall as your mother, the landlady says. I want to rise up, higher than anyone, to be that rock that defied gravity, the one Luis threw to the air that day of the funeral, and not come down, staring at my mother, growing smaller and smaller, and I becoming a pebble that would vanish in the wind.

When will it come? Ma said, that night. She was waiting for the rain; her blouse sticky with sweat that leaked from under her arms.

Since that night she crashed her hand on the table, *Don't speak to me again until you've apologized*, my Ma began to openly see Mr. De Leon, Luis' father. This is her way of mocking me.

They'd be seen walking together to the market, a restaurant, the dilapidated movie theater. She's even taken to attending Mass, this woman who bought the Virgin Mary from the cathedral as a joke — *Holy virgins! Some mumbo jumbo made up to convince us to keep our cunts sewn up*. Cackling as she paid the peddler, a man whose bright eyes glared out at her, as he sat by the Church's stone steps. When we sing the *Ama Namin*, Ma would take Mr. De Leon's hand. *Peace be with you*, and she'd kiss him on the cheek. His abashed grin, the back of his hand wiping any scarlet mark she's left on him. I followed them to his house once; a proper house with a fence and a garage. Instead of mango trees, he had a row of skinny trees, seemingly without branches, things that didn't grow fruits or flowers but sprouted straight up from the

ground like tall gangly boys. As Ma and the man walked, their feet made crunching noises, shoes treading over the yellow grass like they're walking on candy wrappers.

That house, Luis' house, I've often dreamed of living within its walls. Inside is dark wood, heavy sala sets of varnished Narra, with intricately carved vines and flowers, a huge portrait of horses, a master bedroom for the father, and two smaller ones for Luis and his older siblings. I've been inside only once; Ma told me not to come over as Mr. de Leon had his hands full with four kids and no wife. I wanted to live there. Wanted to sleep in a bed that is not my Ma's, share it with an older girl maybe, one full of wisdom and kindness who'd help out with my homework and tell me I'd make a wonderful sister.

I imagined Ma and the man together in bed. Her mouth a scarlet circle. The sounds they'd make. Similar to that time Ma couldn't get out of bed from the pain in her belly. *Carlie... My God, Carlie...* Her eyes rolling into whites. I was terrified. Her hand gripping my arm, clawing at the sheet. *Carlie, something's wrong...* Blood blossoming on the bed.

It's better this way, Ma told me afterwards, talking over the music. Those hands that had teeth, that bit blindly into my arms, now racing across the keyboard, her arpeggios stretching forever, scaling distances, running mile after mile. It couldn't have happened anyway, she said. He's married. Besides, I don't love him.

With Ma, men are only good to the touch, and are good only for touching. I don't see how Mr. de Leon will be any different. And she'd never let me have Luis.

I'll pack up my things. My clothes into little balls. In the other suitcase, my drawings, rolled like diplomas... the plastic with the napkins, now slit open. I wouldn't want any real souvenirs this time.

I'll kiss the landlady's shiny cheek; my Ma I'd hug – Sorry, Ma. Maybe we should leave each other for a while.

I'll go from that bedroom I share with her, with the tired old bed, the blue curtains, the dresser where I'd leave the Virgin Mother, to irritate her. The living room, dim and dusty, the piano silent, sleeping; the kitchen with the table that refuses to stand still because its legs are uneven, out the screen door that bangs against the frame.

Wait, Ma would yell after me. I'll turn around. I'll be on the other side of the door, a screen between us. Where will you go?

I'll find a place, I'll say.

A place where my life will be for my own mistakes to make.

I'll walk down the pathway that leads to the road, not looking back; I've memorized it anyway – the house, its walls holding back a sigh, the mango trees just beginning to flower. I'll trudge down the main road, not running this time, loaded with two suitcases. I'll stop by Luis' house, with the fence and the yellow grass and the Indian trees. Luis by the gate: You'll be taller than me next time we meet.

I've always been taller than you, stupid.

There won't be a funeral this time; the bus will pull up on an empty road. I won't wave goodbye because this has never been my home and there's no one to wave to anyway. I'll be gone, the wheels of the bus spinning dust at its wake. I'll be gone.

I sit here, dreaming, in the kitchen that is too real, at the table with the one short leg, and the sky breaks open in a torrent of rain.

The house is surrounded by sound, erratic and unpredictable, like my Ma when she's too lazy to play properly, like my Ma herself. It comes in gusts of silver. The door swings open, Ma steps in shaking the water off her hair. Will you look at that! Her voice a laugh. Her clothes cling to her body. Carlie! Guess neither of us will be going out any time soon!

After days and days and days, the sky, too tired to hold back any more, had finally released itself.

Too wet outside to play, Luis and I hole up in the bedroom Ma and I share. We slip under my Ma's dresser and light a candle between us. Ma is in the kitchen with the landlady, preoccupied with putting glue on the ceiling, a futile attempt at stopping the water from seeping through.

I want a house, I say. I want a house that is mine, the kind you see in those glossy little pamphlets: entire villages with houses built close to each other, with identical roofs and identical garages. Walk into a neighbor's house and you'd know where the bathroom is, where the light switches are, where they hang their shirts and pillowcases to dry. It's like you're still home, only the furniture's a little different; they smell a little different.

When the ceiling leaks in my house, Luis says, Nanay and I place buckets on the floor. Always the same spots every year.

Does your Dad know where to put them?

I don't know. He's probably forgotten. Then I'd walk into the living room and slip, break my neck.

In my house, my ceiling will be perfect. And maybe it won't have a piano. So when Ma has to teach, she'd have to leave, make a house call to her students. I'll have the house for an hour, to myself.

You like being alone?

I won't have a landlady. Or her husband. Or her kids. But I'll maybe ask my Lolo and Lola over, and my aunts and uncles. We'll have a grand reunion.

There are too many people in my house, even with Nanay gone.

Outside, we hear the steady drum of rain. Like the band at the funeral, with its rattle and boom.

Make a wish, Luis tells me.

There are so many of them crowding my head; we have to light the candle several times for every wish I make. At the last sputter of the candle, we sit in silence, cloaked in the sound of the storm, and my fingers, with their secret eyes, find their way to his.